



NEWS

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By Barbara Brackman

Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History November 21 – 27, 1854

The Fitchburg, Massachusetts, *Sentinel* published a letter from Kansas Territory describing the cost of living as “somewhat cheaper than in Boston,” and giving prices for foodstuffs available. “The best sirloin steak only 7 ½ cents by the single pound.” Settlers also could buy western hams, flour and dried corn, apples and peaches, which seemed the extent of their fare. Northerners complained about the diet of ham and hominy, the pork and corn staples of the Southern table. Southerners, on the other hand, found New England’s diet of beef, beans and wheat bread unpalatable. Travelers on the riverboats eyed each other’s breakfasts to determine whether their fellow passengers might be pro-slavery or freestate in politics. No one had fresh vegetables or butter. Thanksgiving dinners on the 30th promised to be more of the same.

The unnamed correspondent, probably from Lawrence, asked that his family send “a good-sized American flag,” which he intended to fly from a “liberty pole of 100 feet...on top of the hill.” A Liberty Pole topped with a flag and a striped stocking cap still marked the center of American towns with Revolutionary War symbols of rebellion. The hand knit cap symbolized the average man fighting the aristocracy; the pole, as tall a tree trunk as could be found, recalled revolutionary pride in declaring independence.

New towns continued to be named by potential voters hunkered in to wait for the November 29th election. Douglas, named for the Senator from Illinois, was a single log cabin ten miles west of Lawrence on the Kansas River, where George W. Clarke had set up the Potawatomi Indian Agency. Juniata, at the site of a ferry on the Big Blue River north of the Kaw, attracted New Englanders who’d arrived in Lawrence too late to find land. The territorial government of Kansas, which Governor Andrew Reeder had been administering from Fort Leavenworth, moved to the brick buildings at the Shawnee Methodist Mission near Westport. There, Reeder divided the territory into seventeen election districts reflecting the fast-growing population centers.

Three men were running for the office of Territorial Representative to the U. S. Congress. Reeder promoted Democrat Robert Flenniken, who’d accompanied him from Pennsylvania, with circulars passed out with the election proclamation.

Flenniken, who'd served as a diplomat in Denmark during the Polk administration, advocated Reeder's moderate policy. Both men supported the Kansas Nebraska Act and its provision allowing voters to determine the territorial position on slavery. Both were optimistic those voters would reject slavery.

Flenniken's opponents, despite similar names, reflected opposite, more radical positions. John Whitfield advocated slavery; John Wakefield a free state. Honorary titles helped voters differentiate them. "General" John Wilkins Whitfield, born in Tennessee, was a Pierce appointee who'd been working in the Indian Territory for several years as Agent to the Potawatomi and then the Upper Platte tribes. "Judge" John Allen Wakefield, a recent emigrant to Bloomington, just west of Lawrence, was born in South Carolina, but had spent most of his life in the upper midwest. An independent, he was "a Free-soiler up to the hub---hub and all," and the only legitimate Kansas resident in the race.

In Missouri, the Self-Defense organizations headed by David Atchison and the Stringfellow brothers were also preparing for the Kansas election, planning forays into the Territory to vote for General Whitfield. Sam Ralston of Independence described the events in a letter to a friend. "A meeting of our [Secret Society] was held at Westport, soon after the nomination of Whitfield, and arrangements made to send men to every election precinct in the Territory. I, with 590 others, were ordered to One Hundred & Ten, a point 90 miles beyond the line of our State. We went prepared for any emergency...."

The settlement of "110" bordered 110 Mile Creek, an old camping spot on the Santa Fe Trail, one hundred and ten miles southwest of Missouri's Fort Osage (near Scranton and the intersection of today's U.S. Highways 56 and 75.) Fry McGee, one of the 16 children of early Kansas City settlers James and Eleanor Fry McGee, built a stage station and a bridge on the creek in 1854, charging 25 cents to cross the toll bridge. Like many of his brothers who remained in Missouri, Fry McGee advocated a slave-holding Kansas. His town of 110 became a proslavery outpost. (684 words)

William. J. Osborn, testimony before the United States Congress. Report of the Special Committee, (Howard Report) 1856. Pg. 1131.

Fitchburg *Sentinel*, November 24, 1854.

Letter from Samuel Ralston, December 9, 1854 in W. Darrell Overdyke, editor, "A Southern Family on the Missouri Frontier: Letters From Independence, 1843-1855", *The Journal of Southern History*, Volume XVII, Number 2, May, 1951. 216-237.